

Abbott destabilisation not at Rudd-style proportions ‘at this stage’

The Australian, March 4, 2016 Jared Owens, Reporter, Canberra

Mathias Cormann said he accepted Tony Abbott’s word he was not responsible for the leak of sensitive national security information.

Malcolm Turnbull has put Tony Abbott on notice that he will “set the record straight” whenever the former prime minister expresses opinions that are contradicted by the facts.

Mr Abbott this week told The Australian he was “flabbergasted” by an apparent decision by the new Liberal leadership to delay the operation of the next-generation submarine fleet, destabilising the government and fuelling scepticism about the former leader’s motivations.

The Prime Minister today said the high-profile backbencher was entitled to “speak his mind” but he needed to exercise “his own judgment about his comments”. “He made some remarks during the week about submarines which were commented on, and in fact contradicted, by the Chief of the Defence Force and the secretary of the Defence Department,” he told reporters on NSW’s Central Coast.

“The simple reality is this: the expert advice to the Australian government on the submarine program and as to its timing has been consistent since 2013 – you take the word of Dennis Richardson, the secretary of the Defence Department, you take the word of the Chief of the Defence Force – so that is a fact.

“I respect Tony’s right to speak his mind and he should continue to do so, but it’s very important that as Prime Minister, I set the record straight.”

The Australian Federal Police are investigating the leaking of documents from the Abbott-era draft white paper to The Australian.

Finance Minister Mathias Cormann earlier insisted Mr Abbott’s destabilisation to Malcolm Turnbull’s leadership has not reached Kevin Rudd-style proportions “at this stage”, although “some issues” remain unresolved following last year’s Liberal leadership crisis, Finance Minister Mathias Cormann said today.

Senator Cormann, the deputy leader of the government in the Senate, said he accepted Mr Abbott’s word that he was not responsible for an “incredibly reckless” and “absolutely deplorable” leak of sensitive national security information to The Australian.

“I would have preferred if Tony had chosen not to comment publicly, but he has. We are where we are; we move on,” Senator Cormann told Sky News.

“Tony Abbott is no Kevin Rudd, so you don’t see the same (destabilisation) at this stage. I don’t expect that we would ever be like the Labor Party; we are a very united team. Yes, I mean, obviously there are some issues that are still being worked through in the wake of the leadership transition ... but to compare it with the battles between Julia Gillard and Kevin Rudd would not be right.”

Asked if there were only a handful of dissidents within government ranks, Senator Cormann said: “I’m not going to get into that sort of speculation. “Overwhelmingly the party is united behind Malcolm Turnbull and overwhelmingly we are all focused on providing good government and on doing everything we can do to be successful at the next election under Malcolm Turnbull’s leadership.”

Christopher Pyne said only a “handful of people” had access to the draft defence white paper, reported in *The Australian*, but he “would not immediately assume” Mr Abbott was the leaker. “I don’t have any dramas with Tony,” he told the Nine Network. “I feel the government is doing very well.”

Labor frontbencher Anthony Albanese, who was Kevin Rudd’s deputy prime minister in 2013, said: “I’ve seen this movie; I know how it ends.

“We were promised new politics; what we’ve got is an old vendetta. This is like watching the *Sharknado* movie as they eat each other on the other side.”

Former Liberal minister Peter Reith told Sky News Mr Abbott’s submarines comments were a “classic case of deliberate destabilisation” that would be poorly received among Liberal MPs in marginal electorates.